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ABSTRACT

Concerns are cited regarding definitional, identification, and programing issues for emotionally disturbed students in rural Alaskan schools. Problems with the current state definition include its vagueness, reliance on noneducational experts, and implications that psychological or psychiatric treatment is necessary. Lack of resource room programing for emotionally disturbed children in the state is cited. Intervention guidelines are suggested for assessment/identification and placement/programing. (CL)

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DEFINITIONS AND INTERVENTIONS FOR THE EMOTIONALLY DISTURBED IN ALASKA'S RURAL SCHOOLS

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Definitions and Interventions for the Emotionally Disturbed in Alaska's Rural Schools

Current definitional limitations have made identifying the emotionally disturbed difficult, at best, particularly in Alaska's rural schools. To alleviate some of these difficulties recent efforts to define characteristics of exceptional students have led the Alaska State Department of Education to the inevitable appointing of task forces. Definitions are needed primarily for administrative purposes, but it is hoped that they will also serve the educator by clarifying just what is meant by "exceptional". Changes in the definition and eligibility criteria for special services will lead to not only new identification practices but also new programming options. The following paper reviews the effect of definitions and interventions on the behaviorally troubled and troublesome in Alaska's rural schools.

Definitions

In Alaska the school districts' commitment to serving those exceptional students identified as emotionally disturbed has appeared minimal. Only recently have school psychologists been hired, and then only to assess the eligibility of students who may qualify for special education. Emphasis on identifying learning disabilities and mental retardation has generally meant that the category of emotional disturbance has been overlooked. Other

reasons for the disparity between prevalence estimates and actual numbers of students served as emotionally disturbed, are reviewed by Kauffman (1980), who points out that if you say that there are disturbed children in your school but that resources to serve them are not available you "risk becoming the pariah who brings the threat of loss of federal funds upon yourself and your fellow supplicants" (p. 525).

Another reason for the schools neglecting a proportionate number of students with emotional problems rests with the state's definition under which students may be identified as eligible for services. The current definition is vague, relies on outside (non-educational) experts, and implies that psychological or psychiatric treatment must be provided. This is the only exceptionality area in which a non-educational related "treatment" is specified as part of the eligibility criteria. In contrast, a qualified diagnostician must be part of the assessment team that identifies a student as learning disabled; however, "treatment" by that qualified diagnostician is not required to receive special education services. For all the exceptionality areas except emotional disturbance, a resource room or special education teacher may be the sole resource for carrying out an individualized instructional program. Therefore, because only resource room services are available in most rural schools, many behaviorally disturbed students do not benefit from special services program support. The current definition excludes them.

To better meet the needs of rural students and arrive at a more educationally relevant framework for defining an emotional disturbance, a State Department of Education study group was appointed to resolve some of the definitional difficulties. Bound by PL 94-142, the group has made its recommendations. What could happen is that an emotional disturbance may be quantified behaviorally by degrees and based in part, on local community norms and expectations. The proposed criteria provide a somewhat clearer structure with which to build a case for special services eligibility. This clarification of terms fosters increased Child Study Team (CST) involvement which can lead to more realistic expectations of the itinerant psychologist's services. A variety of activities and procedures are expected to evolve from new regulations clarifying eligibility criteria for the emotionally disturbed. Acceptance of the aforementioned study group's report may well change the way schools, especially in rural-remote areas, provide services to the emotionally disturbed.

Interventions

Presently, resource rooms in rural schools provide little, if any, service to the emotionally disturbed. There are school psychologists available in some districts yet they are often restricted by large caseloads consisting of assessment duties or they choose

to be involved in program administration. Other mental health services are sketchy. Most social services programs cannot afford to send their mental health workers to the rural-remote communities throughout the state; it's just not "cost-effective". Services are not denied to those rural residents who can come to town, including students. For more effective programming new considerations should be given to preintervention, assessment and programming strategies.

Preintervention/Referral

Although prevalency rates reported for behaviorally disordered students represent a wide range, almost all figures are higher for expected than actual prevalence. Generally, behavior problems serious enough to warrant special treatment may be found in 2 to 3% of public school students while 20 to 30% suffer with lesser and transient problems, those which can be handled by regular teachers given support (Balow, 1979). To help reduce such high prevalency rates the school's curriculum may need to address issues relevant to understanding affect and behavior.

Affective education as a preventative means to reducing behavior disorders should be encouraged. Caution must be exercised, however, in rural Alaskan schools. With such a variety of training programs, curricula and specific activities available, the effectiveness of any particular program deserves more attention. For example,

the underlying values held by programs such a Magic Circle, DUSO or TA for Tots may affect students differently in Fort Yukon or Nikolski than expected by promoters of such programs. Once programs are selected to be included in the curriculum, effectiveness is contingent on the way in which they are presented. Stilwell and Barclay (1980) argue for a systematic approach to affective education which involves all students within the classroom yet recognizes individual differences of students with unique social-affective needs.

With or without affective education as part of the regular curriculum, teacher characteristics and classroom structure itself play a role in increasing or decreasing the likelihood of appropriate behaviors. Merely delineating and posting specific classroom rules can often ward off some disruptive or aberrant behaviors. It is generally agreed that a positive classroom environment which emphasizes students' strengths is less likely to foster behavioral problems than a punitive one. Some studies (cf. Brophy and Good, 1974) suggest that "warm and enthusiastic" teachers produce better affective responses from their students. A variety of other teacher and classroom characteristics are suggested in the literature as affecting the emotional climate of the classroom and, therefore, helping to prevent or curtail behavioral or emotional problems.

As students learn about appropriate behaviors within the classroom a normative system emerges with students' behaviors on

a continuum from "good" to "bad" with most students falling in between most of the time. Once this normative system is established it is easier for the teacher to identify truly aberrant behavior. To help the teacher more objectively identify the behavior disorders precipitating referral, several observational methods and behavior checklists are available. The recent increase in the use of checklists for screening problem behaviors has led to occasional inappropriate application. For example, a frequent practice involves using the Walker Problem Behavior Checklist with primary grade students. Results of the "Immaturity" scale are often inflated since the instrument was standardized on older students. Nevertheless, teachers should be encouraged to identify problem behavior more objectively and in context. Appreciation of local normative behavior and acceptance limits of deviant behavior can help put teacher expectations in perspective.

Assessment/Identification

After considering the limits of normal behavior and the acceptable limits of deviant behavior, the teacher is in a better position to present a referral for psychological services. A variety of data can be collected prior to the psychologist's visit. Generally, the information is collected by members of the CST and should include:

1. A statement of the problem behaviors in objective and preferably measurable terms.

2. The duration of time the situation has been problematic for the student, teacher and class.
3. The intensity of the problem in relation to other classroom circumstances.
4. Academic achievement levels and/or indicators of the problem's affect on educational performance.
5. A summary of the intervention strategies tried to alleviate the problematic behaviors.
6. The degree to which parents and significant others have been involved and the effect of the involvement.

From responses to these statements the school psychologist can analyze the circumstances surrounding students referred for further evaluation. A syntheses of these data will provide clues in determining the best assessment strategy to follow.

Although multiphasic evaluation is generally agreed to be an essential strategy in identifying exceptional students, it is not enough for an adequate assessment. As Hynd and Garcia (1979) point out in an article on the intellectual assessment of Native Americans, using a wide range of instruments seems not only obvious but inadequate as well. Just as unique cultural values need to be identified to determine how they may affect the evaluation of intellectual abilities, so must their effect on behavior be assessed. Using a multifaceted approach and considering local values, Coulter and Morrow (1979) have developed a systematic

model for identification and intervention which includes classroom, curriculum, parent and student based assessment. Unfortunately, such a multidimensional approach to the assessment of students referred as emotionally disturbed is too often lacking in Alaska.

Placement/Programming

After assessment activities verify that administrative eligibility criteria have been met, special services support is made available. Appropriate placement alternatives must be considered with the "least restrictive alternative" chosen. In rural Alaskan communities limited local resources restrict placement options. For example, self contained classrooms for the emotionally disturbed are virtually non-existant. Local community resources are also very sparse. Concurrently, criticism is growing against the practice of sending exceptional students away from local support systems to state and out-of-state institutions.

With a growing tendency to keep students at home, the question of community acceptance of exceptional students, especially those emotionally disturbed, needs to be considered in placement decisions. Rural community attitudes toward disabled persons are reported to be less accepting than urban residents' attitudes (Tunick, Platt & Bowen, 1980). Whether these findings can be generalized to bush communities is questionable. Yet, only recently have bush schools attempted to deal with exceptional students. Because past programs have usually called for the removal of students to

larger communities or even Outside, it is not known what the level of community acceptance will be. Presently, most school systems consider inter-district transfers and other out-of-community placements as a last resort.

When behavior problems do not warrant placement outside of school other alternatives can be tried. With less severe problems classroom interventions may be sufficient. Resource personnel can assist the classroom teacher in a variety of ways. Two examples follow:

1. A behavior modifying program may be designed for the teacher to follow. Several sources may offer strategies including self-awareness (Canfield and Wells, 1976), teacher awareness (Krumboltz and Krumboltz, 1972), modeling, social role-taking and contingency management (Stephens, 1978). Other resources for supporting teacher implemented strategies range from a "survival kit" orientation (Collins and Collins, 1975) to understanding "psychology in the classroom" (Dreikurs, 1968).
2. Helping the teacher understand classroom dynamics will facilitate intervention strategies aimed at affecting behaviorally disturbed students. It is known that peer influences play an important role in shaping behavior. Gresham (1980) points this out in a study of EMR students in a self-contained classroom. When reinforcement was made contingent on a specified level of group

performance (interdependent) or when class reinforcement was contingent on the performance of selected class members (dependent) then behavior management was more effective than when reinforcement was contingent upon each class member's independent behavior.

Other intervention strategies may include involving community resources in a more "ecological" approach. An ecological model for behavioral assessment has been proposed (Carlson, Scott & Eklund, 1980) but an ecological model for programming is still new to special education programs. Mental health teams in the school have also been a popular strategy (cf. Lawrence, 1971) but writing program objectives to include community members is still an area open for expansion. Attempts to involve community resources have to be made in some Alaskan communities. For example, some school districts contract with local mental health centers to provide treatment for students identified as emotionally disturbed and hold the center employees accountable for changes in "educational performance". Occasionally, other environmental factors affecting the student's behavior are manipulated by community members.

By virtue of limited resources rural resource teachers and itinerant support personnel must be willing to go to special lengths to provide adequate educational programs to the emotionally disturbed. Innovation, persistance and patience are key factors to success in rural schools.

Conclusion

This paper has addressed definitional, identification and programming issues for the emotionally disturbed student in our rural schools. As Kauffman (1980) suggests, "disordered behavior is whatever we choose to make it" (p. 524). The State DOE's recent attempt to shape consistency in viewing what constitutes an emotional disturbance, gives evidence to Kauffman's notion. Now that criteria are established identification proceedures must take shape. Eligibility assessments will depend largely on the investments school district administrators choose to make in terms of personnel and commitment to excellence. Interventions too, must be thought through more carefully.

Rural schools must hold visiting psychologists accountable for providing quality services. School personnel can help in this effort by being prepared for on site visits and holding expectations within reasonable limits. Psychologists can arrive prepared by familiarizing themselves with rural realities. Continued awareness, training and advocacy will help shape a brighter future for exceptional Alaskan students.

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